

## **Winston Churchill defending local school districts – Part 1**

September 12th, 2008 by Ray Pinney

Sometimes I think that it is good that I can be simpleminded. Wait a minute! Let me rephrase that! Sometimes it is better to keep things simple and basic and not overthink them. In a world where I often view issues through a spectrum that is comprised of many different shades of gray, there are some that I see as black and white. Local school governance is one of those black and white issues.

When things look bleakest (like when it appears that local governance's time may have come—and gone), I return to the famous Winston Churchill quote on democracy to restore my faith in our system: *“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”* This quote keeps things a bit light hearted and it is, without question, absolutely true. Recently a former board member, Meg Berlin, sent me that quote and I was glad to see another believer. I am disheartened, however, that it sometimes seems that there are not enough believers. I hope that by the end of this blog, I can increase the number of believers.

Among people in the education community, there is wide agreement that public education and particularly local governance is under attack. What we don't always see is that this attack and the “reforms” that have been proposed and enacted indicate a dramatic shift in our country's democratic principles. These changes are not just modifications to some of the flaws in the local school governance process, but represent a belief that the local board members and administrators are part of the problem and the state is the solution. It is a battle between democracy vs. state bureaucracy. Maybe I am being a bit melodramatic, but let's look closely.

It was once said by an advocate for school consolidation that if George Washington was crossing the Delaware River now he would never dream of finding over 600 public school districts. That statement may or may not be true, but it does raise a question. What components of a system that governs a good public school district do we value most?

I think we all want a system that involves the parents and community, is open in its processes, is accountable for its actions, and is fiscally responsible. I am not going to argue that every board of education in the state has upheld these principals all the time because they haven't, but as Winston Churchill would acknowledge, democratic institutions are imperfect entities.

Whether the failings are real or imagined, they have spurred action by the legislators and the Department of Education. That action has come in the form of the accountability regulations, executive county superintendents, and more authority in the hands of the

Commissioner of Education. Most of these actions have been cast as reforms designed to curb the abuses of the current democratic system, especially in the area of fiscal responsibility.

It does not take great foresight to see where public education seems to be going. These changes are quickly moving governance authority from the local district administrators and boards of education to unelected state bureaucrats. Those bureaucrats make decisions that affect children from a place that is much more distant than those children and their families than the local school district.

Where is the opportunity for the parents to appeal a county superintendent's decision? At least with local boards of education, dissatisfied citizens can go to a board meeting, or even corner the board member in the frozen food aisle of the supermarket to express their concern. Or, they can vote a board member out of office.

Public input was diminished with the enactment this spring of [A-45](#), which allows the Commissioner to implement regulations without any public input for one year. Can you imagine any local entity having that power? I can envision a day when boards of education are merely figurehead positions and a relic of a quaint idealistic time much like the Greek city-states or New England town hall meetings. Once the public realizes that the classroom decisions are being made in a county office or in Trenton, and there really is no regular meeting to attend, they will become disenfranchised from the education system.

I know that I have painted a bleak future, but do I believe it will all come to fruition? Not really, because while our current system is flawed the alternative is also deeply flawed. Especially when we are putting a tremendous workload on the Department of Education, while cutting back on its staffing.

While George Washington may not have envisioned 600 school districts, I also do not think he envisioned of large state bureaucracy running local schools. Now that vision would be something that maybe Nikita Khrushchev would have admired. That is probably too harsh a statement. I should clarify that the proponents of these changes are not anti-democracy or communist but that they just probably have less faith than I or Winston Churchill have in democracy and local government. I do have a great example that illustrates my point, but that will have to wait till next week.